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ALERT

by

Rev. R. H. DOBSON

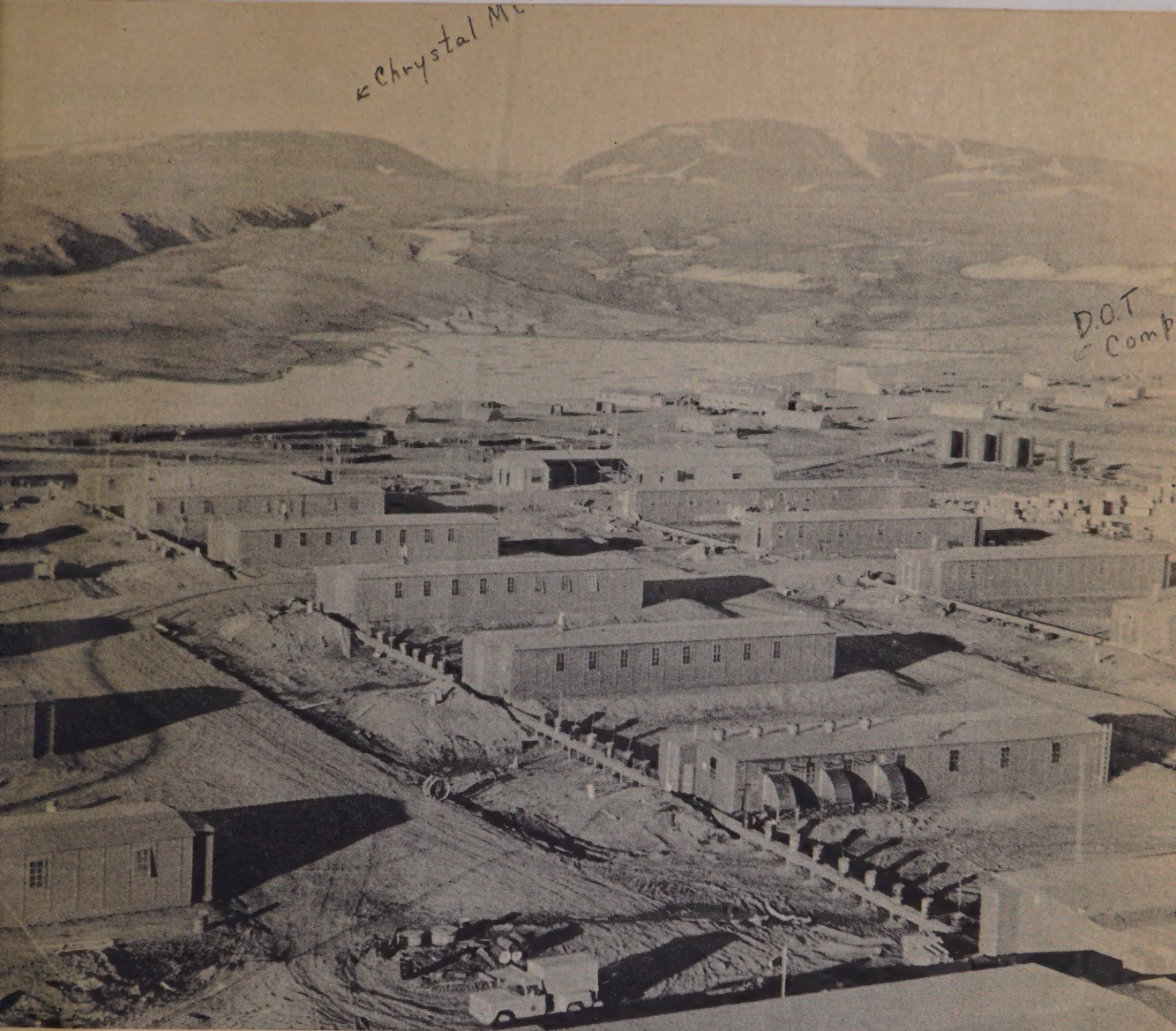
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POLAR
PAM
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POLARPAM



An aerial view of Alert, the most northern permanent settlement in the world.

ALERT

***It's a frightening experience to face
a 50-mile-an-hour wind running wild
over hundreds of miles of snow. When
it gets above that, nobody moves.***

By Rev. R. H. Dobson

06853

AT 20,000 feet in an RCAF *Hercules* transport there's an awful lot of room to think, and a vast white wilderness to see.

When you stand on the northern tip of Canada and look still further north to see more snow and ice — well, you wonder what we're meant to do with all that territory.

Let me quote you something: "It was in 1870 that Canada took over this vast territory from Great Britain, and with sovereignty it assumed immense responsibilities. One of the responsibilities attaching to sovereignty is occupation, and the mass of the Arctic and its islands cannot continue to lie dormant under the protection of a mere assertion on ownership."

I'm quoting from a Royal Bank monthly letter published more than



six years ago. The statement is as true today as it was a hundred years ago. Why am I interested? Last October the Director of Chaplain Services for the Armed Forces of Canada sent me to conduct Thanksgiving services for the men of Alert.

Alert is the most northerly inhabited place in Canada. It's only 427 miles from the North Pole, and it's 2,700 miles from Vancouver by air. In fact, on the map you can see that it's almost the same distance from every major city in Canada near the 49th Parallel. It's in the same time zone as Halifax, four hours ahead of Vancouver on the clocks.

They get six months of night there. The sun fails to rise above the horizon starting with the 12th day of October, and it does not return until mid-March. Men working different shifts are never sure what time of day it is when they wake up.

Huge diesel generators kick out 500 kilowatts apiece to keep lights burning in the huts. There, in that circle of light reflecting on red buildings, you realize how dependent you are on the steady throb of those diesels. About five miles from camp, there's a large glacial cave that has been considered a possible refuge in the event of any catastrophe to heating and lighting.

The Canadian government established Alert as a weather station in 1950. Since then the Department of National Defence has manned the weather station and a signals station there with a handful of unenthusiastic servicemen.

There is much to be done, in a short season. Engineers had erected a big gymnasium and recreation building that summer, and I dedicated it on Thanksgiving Sunday. On the Saturday, I'd gone with a group of

engineers in two *Bombardiers* to the top of Chrystal Mountain, twelve hundred and fifty feet high and five and a half miles from camp. At that height and distance the camp looked small and fragile in that awful wilderness, but the engineers bolted a brass plaque to a pole on the summit and thereby declared their intention to continue in the tradition of Peary, Stefansson and a host of others. There is still land to be pioneered, but it's much easier now. Two years before, the old *Bombardier* "conked out" half way up and we had to scabble our way to the top on hands and knees. Now, a new snowmobile cat-tracked us all the way to the summit where we stepped out, had a look east to the mountains of Greenland, north to the ice-choked polar cap, west to the United States range of Ellesmere Island's mountains, gold tipped with the last rays of the winter's sun, and south toward all the rest of Canada. We didn't look very long. The wind was bitterly cold. The lads had brought pick and shovel to dig for crystals, but mukluks, parka and mitts were just barely adequate to withstand the wind chill.

It's a frightening experience to face a fifty-mile-an-hour wind running wild over hundreds of miles of snow. When it gets above that, (sometimes eighty-five and more in gusts) nobody moves, and every hut is equipped with several days' rations. The air is rare, and parkas and flight boots are heavy. Once or twice I tried running between huts without fastening my zippers and fell, gasping for air.

What would make a tour of Alert more palatable? Should the government build quarters for the married personnel? Should the existing huts be replaced by more permanent barracks? Should the government

"I see its pioneering problems as survival of the fittest."

minimize the manpower supervision and put in more sophisticated machines that will, unattended, relay signals to the headquarters in the south? Perhaps the monthly pay should be increased for a northern posting to make it more attractive.

Perhaps homes should be built there for the families of married men. But one man said to me, "I'll not bring my children up here to be torn apart by wolves or dogs." Would women and children complicate the administration of a military base so far from the amenities of life? Another man suggested that he wouldn't mind an increase in the length of posting from six months to a year, provided he could have a week off every two months to see his family. This might be a possibility if every family were at Edmonton or Ottawa, a home base of the Airforce Transport Squadron. It airlifts supplies every week in a round trip flying time of fourteen or fifteen hours.

It has even been suggested that the government should build more married quarters at Inuvik, on the mouth of the Mackenzie River, "the showplace of the North as far as official visitors are concerned," says Farley Mowat.

Perhaps an even more northerly settlement like Resolute, two hours flying time from Alert, should be developed. Here, at last, there's a church and a school and few families of Eskimos. Would this be a good place to continue the process of pushing back the frontier of Canada's northland, until we finally populate, civilize, and enjoy that place called Alert?

(Continued on page 43)



Courtesy of Soldier Magazine
"Well, don't just stand there —
TREMBLE!"

Alert

(Continued from page 12)

One thing is certain, Canada is in the making, and all Canadians can participate. The greatest contribution to Canada's Northwest Territories has not yet been made at Alert. Russia has shown the world that she can establish large industrial cities in her land of ice and snow on the other side of the Pole. These cities not only maintain themselves, but supply vast amounts of raw material and manufactured goods to the rest of Russia. The mention of that country immediately removes the wraps from a word that I've not mentioned before — defence.

If Canada has not yet become aware of the economic and industrial potential of the North, at least she is aware of her proximity to nations like Russia and China, whose ideology is opposed to ours. An airbase at Alert, comparable to Thule in Greenland, would provide a ready answer to defence in the event of worsening relations with these ideologically opposed nations.

When I was in Alert, I recalled the words of Robert W. Service's poem "The Cremation of Sam Magee":

"Why he left his home in the South
To roam around the Pole,
God only knows."

The journey did good things for me. Certainly, my horizons were extended.

What have I learned as a result of two brief trips to Alert and a bit of research that they have stimulated? I've recognized its distance and isolation from the rest of Canada and its inaccessibility without the

help of the airforce. I've caught something of its atmosphere — its awe, fearfulness, ferocity, grandeur and loneliness. I became aware of its hazards, mental, moral, and physical. I see its pioneering problems as survival of the fittest. But its

problems are more than matched by its opportunities — economically and defensively. However, the one thing that I have accepted most realistically is that Alert is for pioneers, more hardy and younger than I. □

Chasing the *Margaree*

(Continued from page 17)

raining when I got to the dockyard. I was challenged, presented my credentials, proceeded to the proper authority, again presented my orders to report to the *Margaree*. I was told she had sailed the night before.

I couldn't believe it. I stood there for a moment looking blank, trying to focus my mind on what to do next. Then I heard the Movements Officer muttering "Sorry old chap, but I guess it's back to hospital with you" — and that did it. My thoughts clicked into place, my old confidence returned, and I heard myself telling him I wasn't going back to hospital and I had to catch the *Margaree*. It took a bit of arguing and protesting, but eventually I found out she would be docking at Liverpool, and I walked away with a railway pass to that city. I had to catch that ship. It might be months before I'd have another opportunity to get across the Atlantic. I wanted so badly to get back to work.

By the time I got to the railway station I was soaked to the skin. The station was crowded and so was the train, but I managed to get on. The evacuation of women and children from the south was in full swing. I stood in the narrow corridor of the train beside compartments of crying children and distraught mothers and looked out the window. The soggy countryside began to move swiftly by, and then dusk and rain blurred it altogether. I sat on the floor and dozed a while, and then woke with a start. The train had stopped and we were in complete darkness. There was excited chattering, then some lights, and then explanations from the railway men. We were in the tunnel under the Bristol Channel. A heavy air attack was in progress over Bristol and we were staying put until it was over. Hours later we emerged and continued our journey. I had managed to get a seat by holding a child on each knee.

A grey morning was replacing the darkness as we approached Liver-

pool, and what a sight of chaos it revealed! This port had also been bombed. The ruins were still smoking and the station was a shambles. The train stopped just outside the station. Hastily I retrieved my baggage, found transport, and made for the dockyard. The rain had pursued me relentlessly. I had a feeling I would never be dry again. And I had missed the *Margaree*! The delay in the tunnel had done it. The ship had sailed just at dawn. My mind seemed to function automatically now and it had only one purpose — to catch the *Margaree*. I ignored the suggestion I go back to Plymouth. I insisted on a railway pass to Greenock, the next port of call, and again I got it.

The train wasn't due to leave until late afternoon. I walked around in the rain and when I got on the train I was incredibly wet.

At Greenock it was raining harder than ever. Mechanically I gathered my baggage and made my way to the dockyards. Once more I went through the familiar routine of presenting credentials and waiting for direction to the proper authority. The only difference in the verdict this time was that it was delivered in a rich Scottish burr.

"The *Margaree* has sailed. I'm feared you'll have to go back to Plymouth."

I wasn't going back. I knew now I'd never catch the *Margaree* but I was determined this miserable chase wouldn't be in vain. I asked to see the shipping master and pleaded with him to get me aboard anything going to North America.

After two false starts, I was able to get aboard a little armed merchant ship, the *Rawalpindi*, which was leaving for Halifax, all on her own.

The ship had been instructed to pursue a zig-zag path and to switch to a southerly course because German pocket battleships were thought to be in the North Atlantic. I got into the habit of going up to the



Courtesy Soldier Magazine

"Oh, yes, I feel quite fit enough to go back on duty, sir—never felt nastier."

The Margaree...

ship's radio office each day to chat and exchange shop talk with the boys, and I often saw the news releases as they were received. One day when I went in, the radio officer looked up from a message he was reading and then handed it to me.

"My God, Sparks, wasn't that the ship you were chasing?"

I started to read. It was an Associated Press release.

CANADIAN DESTROYER MARGAREE SUNK IN MID ATLANTIC. RAMMED BY SHIP IN CONVOY. VERY FEW SURVIVORS.

It couldn't have happened again! The words blurred before my eyes and I leaned against the wall for support. I guess I turned pale for the radio officer got me a chair and called to someone to get some brandy.

"Fate."

I said over and over to myself. "Those men were meant to die. We rescued them and now the accident has been repeated. And what about me? What kept me from getting on that ship? God knows I tried hard enough."

Ten days later, and some eight weeks after I left hospital to join the *Margaree*, we reached Halifax.

I didn't see Scotty in Halifax and I was sure he had gone down with the *Margaree*. I didn't ask about him or my other friends. I didn't want to know the details and avoided any discussion or inquiry about the collision or about the previous *Fraser* episode. Then on a quick duty trip to the West Coast I walked into the wardroom of HMCS *Naden*, and there was Scotty!

"I thought you went down on the *Margaree*" I faltered. "I looked for you in Halifax but I was afraid to ask."

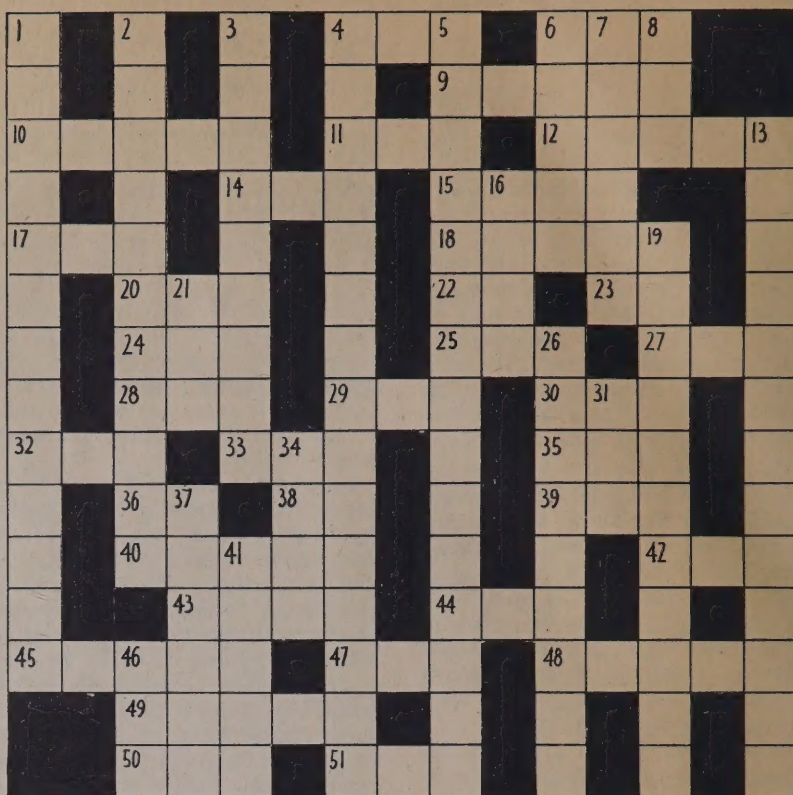
"I was on the bridge again," he said quietly, "just as on the night the *Fraser* was rammed." He put his hand on my shoulder, "How the hell did you miss that ship? You would have been in the Sick Bay and that's where she was hit. Everyone there was lost."

"I didn't know that," I answered weakly. "Let's sit down and have a noggin."

Over a drink I explained why I wasn't on the *Margaree*. At least I recounted the sequence of events that kept me from being aboard. I don't suppose I'll ever be able to explain why so many things happened at just the right time to cause me to miss the *Margaree* and death in the Atlantic. □

CROSSWORD CANADIANA®

By ALFRED SIMPSON



ACROSS

4. ... Paul partnered Barbara Wagner to win gold medals in 1960 Olympics — Figure Skating Pairs.
6. The law.
9. Wanders.
10. Opera by Vincenzo Bellini — 1831.
11. French king.
12. Cuban ballroom dance.
14. Tennis stroke.
15. Golfer's needs.
17. Chinese dynasty — also river joining the Yangtze.
18. Irreverent. (abb.)
20. Chatter.
22. Yes.
23. Feminine nickname.
24. Economy. (abb.)
25. Pronoun.
27. Hint.
28. Mal de ...
29. Circle part.
30. Adjective — superlative degree.
32. Bond.
33. Sea bird.
35. Fifth sign of the zodiac.
36. No good. (abb.)
38. High noon. (abb.)
39. River in Switzerland.
40. Large plants.
42. In Olympic competition, one cannot afford to ...
43. Electricity. (abb.)
44. Impair.
45. to a tenth of a second.
47. Ball.
48. Anoint. (Arch.)
49. Concerning.
50. Prefix meaning "through".

51. Afternoon social event.

DOWN

1. First Canadian woman to win an Olympic gold medal for Skiing — 1960. (2 words).
2. Adaptation of musical composition.
3. Shooting, Gerry Oullette, 1956.
4. Figure Skating gold medal winner in 1948 Olympics. (3 words).
5. University of crew of four won gold medals — Rowing — 1956 Olympics. (2 words).
6. Nearer to nudity.
7. Pleasantly occupied.
8. N.C.O. (abb.)
13. The Olympic Games (modern version) are patterned from a festival in (2 words)
16. Lake larger than Lake Ontario.
19. Crew of four skipped by won gold medals for Bobsledding in 1964 Olympics. (2 words)
21. Playing card.
26. In 1928 Olympics, Florence Bell, Myrtle Cook, Fanny Rosenfeld, and Ethel Smith won gold medals in (2 words)
31. Canada stretches from ... to ...
34. Sigmund
37. Nancy gold medalist in 1968 Olympics.
41. Jim with team of four won gold medals in 1968 Olympics-Equestrian event.
46. Chart.

SOLUTION ON PAGE 49

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